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Exploring academic and policy discourses on social innovation and the ‘Grand Challenge’ rhetoric

Abstract: Purpose

This paper aims to analyze the evolution in the conceptualization of Social Innovation (SI) and how these conceptual approaches are being considered in policy discourses on 'Grand Challenges'. With this purpose, the paper presents a systematic literature review, analyzing 229 definitions extracted from documents dated from 1922 to 2014.

Introduction & research questions

Over the past decades a growing literature on SI has emerged in a wide variety of sources ranging from policy reports and applied practice-oriented to academic contributions (Chambon et al., 1982; Gerometta et al., 2005; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010; Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2004; Mulgan, 2006a; Bureau of European Policy Adviser, 2009; Andrew & Klein, 2010; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012; Moulaert et al., 2013). SI is seen as providing new solutions and instruments to cope with the ‘Grand Challenges’, i.e., the economic crisis and other global dilemmas such as climate change, energy and resource scarcity, health and demographic imbalances, which are becoming more urgent and require rapid resolution (Reid et al., 2010). However, SI is considered a ‘buzz word’ (Pol & Ville, 2009), a catchword (Godin, 2012a) or a ‘container concept’ (Gurrutxaga, 2013) that remains underdefined and, in other cases, seems to be overdetermined in social sciences, i.e., it holds many different and divergent meanings. Although the SI body of literature is expanding, research is fragmented in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches, and several conceptual ambiguities persist despite the accumulation of empirical data (Edwards et al., 2012; Cajiaba-Santana, 2013). In this context, this paper aims the following questions:

- How the conceptualization of SI has evolved from 1922 to date? (the year 1922 identifies the first reference analyzed)
- At what extent are these concepts and theoretical approaches considered/recognized in the rhetoric of the ‘Grand Challenges’ as drivers for research and innovation policy?

Theoretical approach

Although SI is being frequently used as a 'descriptive metaphor' for social change and the transformation of society more broadly (Godin, 2012b; Howaldt et al., 2013), the role of SI is marginal in the mainstream of the innovation studies. For example, SI is not mentioned in the ample analysis of the knowledge basis of the innovation field realized by Fagerberg et al. (2012) neither by Susana Borrás in her book ‘The Innovation Policy of the European Union: From Government to Governance’ (2003). Literature about SI seems still widely on

anecdotal evidence and cases studies with a plethora of meanings and interpretations scattered among different fields like sociology (Chambon et al., 1982; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010; Gurrutxaga, 2013); urban and regional development (Hillier et al., 2004; MacCallum et al., 2009); public policy (Chetkovich, 2011); management (Goldenberg, 2004; Goldenberg et al., 2009); creativity (Mumford, 2002); social psychology (Taylor, 1970) and social entrepreneurship (Leadbeater, 1997), among others. One common point of reference in economic thinking is the publication in 1912 of the Theory of Economic Development in which Schumpeter acknowledged the role of innovation in other spheres of society than the economic—that is, in the cultural, social, and political life—recognizing its role in the transformative process of ‘creative destruction’ (Abernathy & Clark, 1985). This approach is criticized by Godin (2012a,b), who adopted a historical perspective to examine how the concept of SI has been present in academic literature since the beginning of the twentieth century, and even before, related to macro-societal changes. On other hand, the comparison between SI and the general meaning of innovation in the field of innovation studies is problematic due there is a diversity of definitions and that the term SI is frequently used interchangeably and in confuse ways with other concepts like inclusive innovation (Cozzens & Sutz, 2012; Foster & Heeks, 2013), open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003), frugal innovation (Pralahad, 2005), grass-root (Smith et al., 2013), Jugaad innovation (Radjou et al., 2012) and responsible innovation (Von Schomberg, 2013), among others. For example, both frugal innovation and SI are associated to theories which lie at the intersection of social and institutional entrepreneurship (McMullen, 2011) and their role as instruments to achieve inclusiveness and social cohesion.

This paper explores all these approaches with analytical lenses considering innovation as a ‘result/output’ and, at the same time, draw attention to SI as process. In this sense, following to Garud et al., (2013) innovation processes are co-evolutionary (implicating multiple levels of analysis), relational (involving a diverse set of social actors and material elements), inter-temporal (experienced in multiple ways during their evolution) and cultural (unfolding within contextualized settings). The principal hypothesis in this paper is that the concept of SI has experienced an evolution in its meaning and interpretations guided by struggles between different rationalities and divergent epistemic communities.

Methodology

A systematic literature review was used to generate a database including definitions from different literatures, including grey and also academic literature (economics, innovation, sociology, social psychology, etc.). A systematic literature review is based on a rigorous process to identify, select and make a comprehensive analysis and critical synthesis of relevant studies that address a defined question. Compared to traditional literature reviews, systematic reviews offer several advantages for researchers, managers and policy makers, in particular the identification and mobilization of key scientific knowledge on the subject meeting explicit criteria for inclusion and exclusion and transparent quality assessment of studies identified (Becheikh et al. 2006; Hemsley et al. 2003).

One thousand registers were retrieved from Google Scholar using the software Publish or Perish and compared with 364 academic papers from ISI Web of Knowledge and SCOPUS, using the key words ‘social innovation’ and other key terms combinations.

Each register was classified attending to the source of information (academic paper, book, chapter book, research report, policy report and working paper) being the selection

criterion the presence in the document of an explicit definition and explanation of SI. The final database contains 229 definitions organized around a set of attributes/dimensions determined by a recursive content analysis, using matrix techniques for the effective categorization of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2003).

Expected findings & Contribution

This paper aims to provide a state-of-the-art in the conceptualization of SI and how SI relates to the Grand Challenges comparing academic and policy discourses.

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